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# The Other Eurydice

Italo Calvino

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## The Other Eurydice

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Italo Calvino

*Translated by Donald Heiney*

You've won, you outsiders, you've rewritten the stories to suit yourselves, condemning us to the role it pleases you to assign to us, that of the powers of shadow and death, and the name you assign to us, the Underworld Beings, you burden with funereal accents. It's true that if everybody really forgets what happened among us—Eurydice and Orpheus and me, Pluto—this story which is just the other way around from the way you tell it—if the day comes when nobody really remembers that Eurydice was one of us and had never lived on the surface of the Earth before Orpheus ravished her from me with his lying songs—then our old dream of making the Earth a living sphere will be lost forever.

Even now almost nobody remembers what it meant to bring the Earth to life—not what you think, you who are content with this left-over dust of life that collects at the boundary where land, water, and air meet. I wanted life to spread out from the center of the Earth, suffuse the concentric spheres of its design, circulate among its flowing and solid metals. This was the dream of Pluto. Only thus would the Earth have become an enormous living organism, only thus could it have escaped this condition of precarious exile that life has been reduced to, the opaque weight of a dead stone ball under it, and over it the void.

You can't even imagine that life could be anything different from what happens there outside—or almost outside, since above you and the terrestrial crust there is always that other thin crust of the air. But that's not to be compared with the series of spheres in the interstices of which we creatures of the depths have always lived, and from which we still rise to populate your dreams. The Earth inside is not solid—it is stratified, made of superimposed layers of various densities, down to the nucleus of iron and nickel, which in itself is a system of nuclei one inside the other, each rotating layer separated from the other by the greater or lesser fluidity of the element.

You apply the word terrestrial to yourselves, it is not clear with what right—your true designation should be extra-terrestrial, people on the outside—the terrestrial are those who live inside, like me and Eurydice, before the day you took her away from me through trickery to that desolate exterior of yours.

Here is the kingdom of Pluto; it's here inside that I've always lived, first with Eurydice and then alone, in one of these internal countries. Over our heads was a sky of rock, clearer than yours, with clouds in it like your sky, wherever concentrations of chromium and magnesium collected. Winged shadows rise in flight: the internal skies have their birds, clumps of light rock describing upward-gliding spirals until they disappear from view. The weather changes suddenly—when leaden rainshowers beat down, or when there are hailstorms of zinc crystals, there's nothing for it but to take shelter in the hollows of the spongy rock. Sometimes the darkness is pierced with a zigzag of flame: it's not lightning, it's incandescent metal slithering down a vein.

We used to regard earth as the sphere on which we found ourselves placed, and heaven the sphere that went around this sphere—just as you do, in fact, but for us this distinction was always temporary, arbitrary, because the consistency of the elements was constantly changing, so that at a certain point we would notice that our sky was hard and solid, the earth a sticky glue, moving in whirlpools and pullulating with gassy bubbles. I would try to utilize these streams of heavier elements to approach closer to the true center of the Earth, the nucleus that was the nucleus of all nuclei, holding Eurydice by the hand and guiding her in the descent. But every infiltration that opened toward the inferno displaced other material and forced it to rise toward the surface—at a certain point in our descent we would be surrounded by the flow gushing toward the higher strata and tightly enclosed in its grasp. In this way we retraced the terrestrial radius in reverse; in the mineral strata fissures opened that sucked us upward, and under us the rock solidified again. So that in the end we found ourselves standing on another ground with another rock heaven arched over us, without knowing whether we were higher or lower than the point we had started from.

As soon as Eurydice saw the ceiling of a new heaven liquifying above us, she would be seized with an urge to fly. She would plunge upward, swimming through the dome of a first heaven, another, a third, clinging to the stalactites hanging from the highest vaults. I followed her, partly to play the game with her, partly to remind her when to turn and go back in the other direction. Eurydice, of course, felt as strongly as I did that the goal of our exertions ought to be the center of the Earth. Only when we reached the center could we call the whole

planet our own. As the founders of all terrestrial life we ought to set about suffusing the Earth with life to its nucleus, gradually shedding the light of our own being throughout the globe. It was a *terrestrial* life that we sought—one of the earth and *in* the earth—not the kind sprouting from the surface that you see fit to call terrestrial life even though it's only a mold spreading its spots over the wrinkled skin of an apple.

Under basalt skies we could already see springing forth the Plutonic cities we would found, girdled with walls of jasper, spherical and concentric cities floating on oceans of mercury, intersected with rivers of molten copper. It was a living-body-city machine we yearned for that would grow and fill the whole globe, a telluric mechanism which would bend its measureless energy to a constant self-construction, to the combining and permutating of substances and forms, fulfilling with the speed of seismic shock the task that you there outside would have had to pay for with the sweat of centuries. And this living city-machine-body would be peopled with beings like us, giants who would extend their strong-limbed embraces from the circling skies to giantesses who through the rotation of the concentric worlds would be presented in constantly new and bizarre postures, making constantly novel couplings possible.

It was the kingdom of diversity and wholeness that was to spring forth from these medleys and vibrations—the kingdom of silence and music. Constant vibrations, diffusing more or less slowly, according to the depth and hollowness of the material, would tremor through our great silence, transforming it into a ceaseless music of the world in which all the profound voices of the elements would harmonize.

I tell this to show you how wrong your own life is, your life in which work and pleasure are opposed, in which music and noise are separate—to show you how even then the sides were clearly drawn, and the song of Orpheus was simply a token of that partial and divided world of yours. Why then did Eurydice fall into the trap?

Eurydice belonged totally to our world, but her fanciful nature led her to a predilection for various forms of levitation, and as soon as she was given permission to launch into flight or leaps, or go climbing up volcanic flues, you would see her body begin twisting, curving, heaving, and contorting. Any confining place, like a passage from one terrestrial stratum to another, gave her a slight vertigo. As I've explained, the Earth is made of superimposed roofs like the skins of an immense onion, each roof leading to a higher roof, and all of them culminating in the final roof at that point where the Earth ceases to be Earth, where all the inside is behind you, and beyond there's only the outside. For you outsiders this boundary of the Earth is the Earth itself—you regard the sphere as the surface that bounds it, not the volume—you've always lived in that completely flat dimension so that it doesn't occur to you it would be possible to live elsewhere and in some other way, whereas for us this frontier was something we knew about but never expected to see, at least not without coming out of the Earth, a prospect that seemed to us not so much frightening as absurd. It was there on the outside that everything the earth expelled from its viscera was cast forth in eruptions, tarry jets, and geysers—gases, fluid mixtures, volatile elements, all sorts of junk

and refuse. It was the backside of the world, something we couldn't picture even in our thoughts, the very idea of which was enough to cause a shiver of disgust, or dread, or stupor—how will I put it?—a vertigo (you can see our reactions were more complicated than you might think, especially Eurydice's), a feeling that involved nevertheless an element of fascination, the lure of the void, the ambivalent, the ultimate.

Once as I followed Eurydice in these impulsive wanderings we found ourselves in the gullet of an extinct volcano. Above us, widening like the neck of an hourglass, appeared the opening of the crater, clotted and gray, a passage not very different in form and substance from the usual ones in our depths. But the stupefying thing was that the Earth ended there, it didn't go on building on itself in some other way, so that there the void began, or at least a substance incomparably thinner than any we had hitherto experienced, a substance transparent and vibrant, azure air.

These vibrations—so different from those that diffused slowly through the granite and basalt, the clangors, the somber reverberations that filtered sluggishly through the masses of molten metal or the crystalline walls—were Eurydice's downfall. They spring forth like a shower of tiny sounding and motelike sparks, coming from every point of space at a speed unbearable for us—a kind of tickling that sent us into a disordered frenzy. We were seized—or at least I was seized—from here on I ought to distinguish between my own emotions and those of Eurydice—with an urge to draw back into the black silent depths where the earthquakes penetrated only faintly, filtered by distance. But in Eurydice, drawn impulsively as usual to anything odd, there was only an impatience to *know* this peculiar thing, good or evil as it might be.

In that moment the trap sprang: beyond the brink of the crater the air began vibrating continuously, that is in a continuous way involving various discontinuous ways of vibrating. It was a sound that began softly, fell away, gathered volume again, and in this alteration followed an invisible design traced in time like a series of fullnesses and voids. Other vibrations were superimposed, each keen and distinct from the other, but merging into a halo now sweet and now bitter, countering or accompanying the flow of the deeper strain, pressing down like a circle or field or dominion of sound.

My immediate impulse was to slip out of this circle and go back to the padded depths; I slid into the crater. But Eurydice in the same instant had set off over the crags in the direction of the sound, and before I could stop her she had crossed the brink of the crater. Or perhaps an arm, or something I took for an arm, seized her sinuously and drew her away; I heard a cry, her cry, merging with that first sound and in harmony with it, so that she and the unknown singer made a single song together, to the beating chords of some instrument, as they descended the outer slopes of the volcano.

I don't know whether this picture reflects more what I saw or what I imagined—already I was sinking into darkness, the internal heavens closed over me one by one—flinty vaults, aluminum roofs, atmospheres of sticky sulphur. The myriad silence of the underground echoed around me with its subdued roars, its murmured thunder. I was filled with relief at escaping from that nauseating air-

boundary and the torment of the sound waves, mingled with despair at having lost Eurydice. Here I was, alone—I had been unable to save her from the agony of being ravished from the Earth, exposed to that constant impact of chords distended in air by which the world of void defended itself against the void. My dream of rendering life to the Earth by reaching its ultimate center with Eurydice had failed. Eurydice was a captive, exiled in those open plains outside.

There followed a period of waiting. My eyes contemplated the closely-pressed landscapes that filled the volume of the globe—threading caverns, mountain-ranges rising in cliffs and escarpments, oceans squeezed like sponges—the more I came to know our crowded, concentrated, solid world, the more I suffered that Eurydice was not with me to inhabit it.

Freeing her became my sole thought—forcing the gate of the outside, invading the external with the internal, gathering Eurydice to the terrestrial material again, building over her a new vault, a new mineral sky, saving her from the hell of that vibrating air, that sound, that song. I kept watch on the accumulation of the lava in volcanic caverns, the pressure on the flues leading upward to the earth's crust—this was the way.

The day of the eruption came. A tower of ashy débris rose into the air over decapitated Vesuvius, lava rushed over the vineyards of the gulf, forced the gates of Herculaneum, crushed the mule-driver and his beast against the wall, snatched the miser from his money, the slave from his fetters, the dog held in his collar pulled up the chain and sought shelter in the granary. I was in the very middle of it—I came forth with the lava, the fiery avalanche flared out in tongues, rivulets, and serpents, and at the point of its farthest advance there I was, flying in search of Eurydice. I knew—something told me—she was still the captive of the unknown singer—wherever I heard again the music of that instrument and the tone of that voice, there she would be.

I swept on, carried by the flow of lava, past scattered orchards and marble temples. I heard singing and a harp-sound; two voices alternated; I recognized that of Eurydice—but how altered!—following the lead of the unknown voice. An inscription on an arched doorway in Greek letters: Orpheus. I burst through the entrance, floated over the threshold. I saw her, for a fleeting instant, next to the harp. The place was closed and hollow, constructed apparently so music would gather in it as in a shell. A heavy curtain—or leather it seemed, or padded like a quilt—sealed the window, in such a way as to isolate this music of theirs from the surrounding world. As soon as I entered Eurydice drew the curtain with a jerk and flung open the window: it opened onto the dazzling reflections of the gulf, onto the city, onto the streets. The noonday light invaded the room, and with the light came sounds—a strumming of guitars from every direction, the undulating moan of a hundred loudspeakers, mingled with a ragged uneven crackling of motors and the sounds of horns. The carapace of noise spread out over the crust of the globe—the covering that marks the boundary of your surface life, with its antennas sticking out of roofs to change into sound the waves that travel invisibly and inaudibly through space, the transistor-radios stuck against ears to fill them constantly with that acoustic glue without which you would no longer know whether you were dead or alive, the juke-boxes storing up and spilling out sound,

the uninterrupted siren of the ambulance gathering up hour after hour the victims of your uninterrupted slaughter.

Against this wall of sound the lava stopped. Transfixed by the thorns of this clamoring and vibrating barbed-wire, I advanced another step toward the point where I had seen Eurydice for an instant, but she was gone, along with her ravisher—the song in which and from which they lived was drowned in the eruption of this avalanche of sound, I could no longer distinguish either her or her song.

I withdrew, moving backward in the lava-flow, scaling once more the slopes of the volcano, returning to inhabit, to bury myself in, silence.

Now, you who live outside, let me know, if by chance you happen to detect the song of Eurydice in the thick paste of sounds that surrounds you—the song that captivated her and became in its turn the captive of the non-song that slays all song—if you happen to recognize the voice of Eurydice in which there still rings the distant echo of the silent music of the elements, tell me, send me news of her, you Extra-terrestrials, so that I may turn again to my plan of carrying Eurydice to the center of terrestrial life, of revitalizing the kingdom of the inside gods, the gods who inhabit the dense thickness of things—now that the outside gods, the gods of high Olympus and rarefied air, have given you all they have to give you, and it is clear it is not enough.